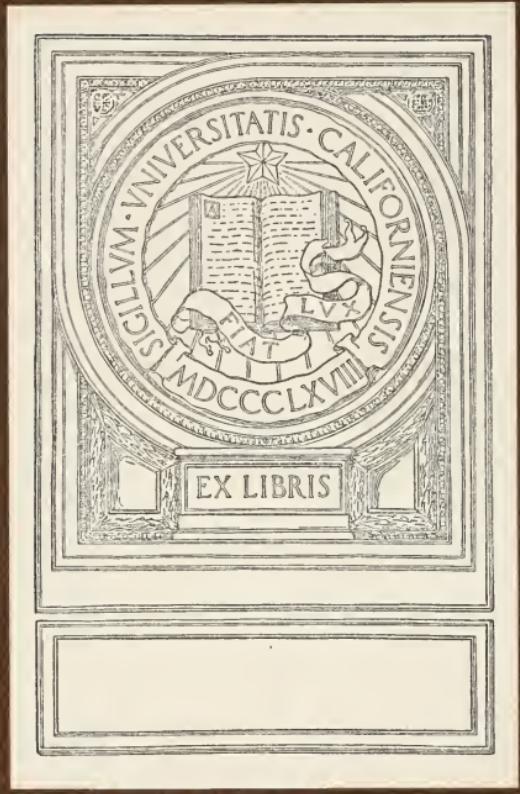


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THE FUNCTIONS OF CRITICISM

A LECTURE
DELIVERED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY
ON FEBRUARY 22 1909

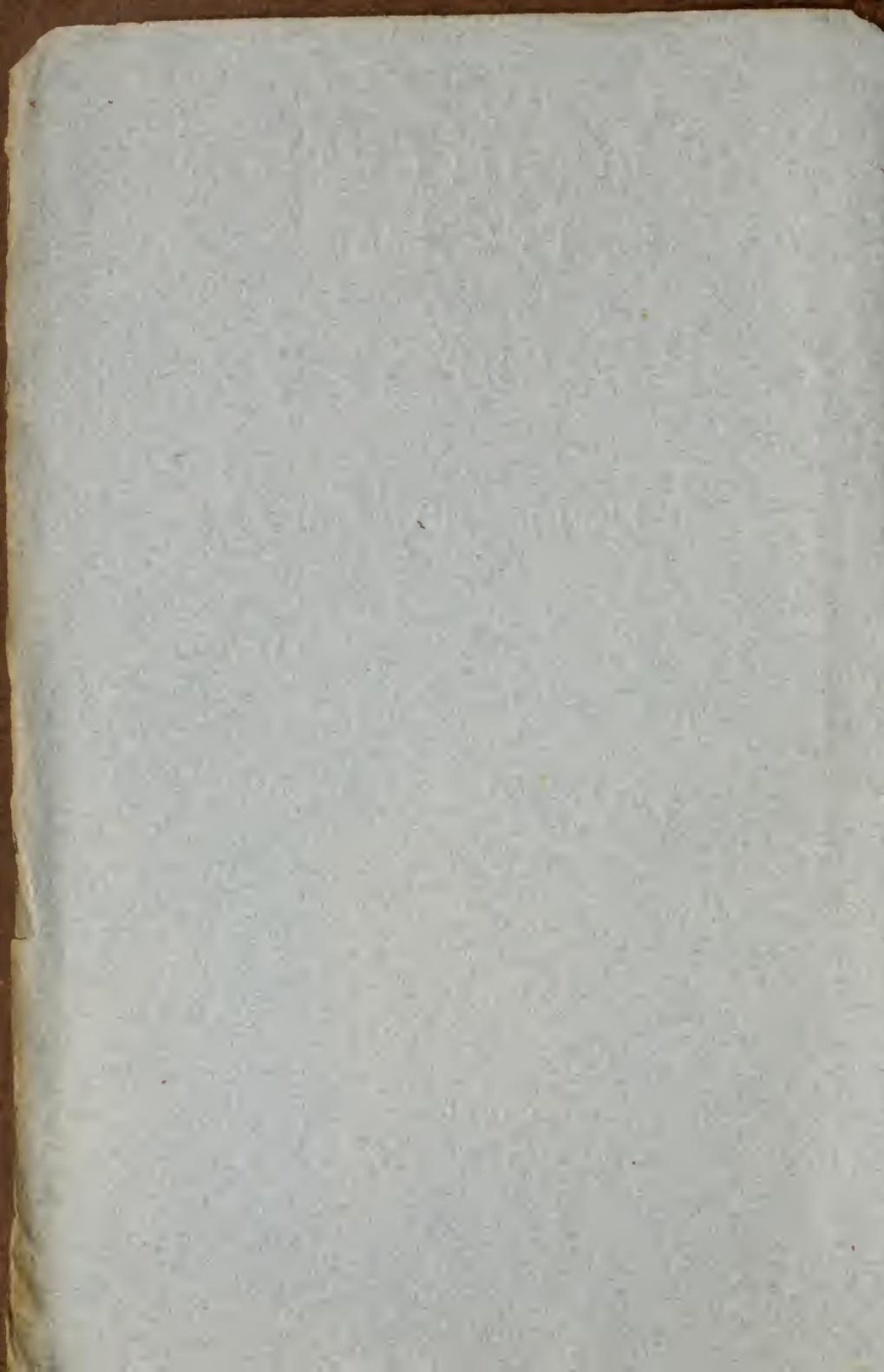
BY

D. NICHOL SMITH M.A.
GOLDSMITHS' READER IN ENGLISH

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HENRY FROWDE, M.A.
PUBLISHER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
LONDON, EDINBURGH, NEW YORK
TORONTO AND MELBOURNE

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THE FUNCTIONS OF CRITICISM

A NEW interest has been shown of recent years in the aims and methods of criticism. At a time when it may be said that the history of our literature is being rewritten, criticism has also enlarged its field by examining its own habits and tracing their growth. It seems to have been awokened by its vigour to a sense of its dignity ; it has even claimed that the changes in taste may be read in its progress as well as in the progress of poesy. Only fifteen years ago the student of English criticism might experience the pleasures and the perils of the first adventurer. He had little to guide him—certainly little that had been produced in this country. Now we have a long and learned history from the earliest texts to the present day, and the press of this University is making the first collection of documents representing its main forms.

On reviewing this progress we are prompted to search for the common functions underlying the great variety of expression. But the same inquiry is suggested by what is written now. There are obvious distinctions in the work of all our leading critics. If they have not different conceptions of their duties, they have at least different ways of fulfilling them. Some have the gift of writing as if there was only one way in which for the time they could express themselves ; they appear never to have thought whether they approach their subject in an old or a new manner. Others are greatly interested in their method and are proud to proclaim its novelty. They have assumed that in the first place it is necessary to perfect the machinery of criticism to ensure the value of the product ; and if sometimes the

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THE FUNCTIONS OF CRITICISM

machinery has been difficult to set in motion, in not a few cases it has worked with good results.

Even the academic study of English literature exhibits a variety of method. A student at once recognizes that those who have been trained in other schools—not necessarily in France, or Germany, or America, but even in this country—possess a different equipment, if not a different outlook. Again we are invited to consider the functions of criticism ; and the obligation to consider them rests on one who has been given the privilege of working in the school which has already asserted its pre-eminence, in the school of the University which, from the days of Sir Philip Sidney, numbers so many of the great critics among her sons. I am very conscious of the difficulties which this obligation entails. The safest and the simplest course will be to begin with a description of the main types of criticism. If the description is adequate, the functions may be implied.

Let us put out of account for our present purpose the criticism which aims at establishing the text of an author, and the historical and antiquarian investigation which explains allusions, establishes dates, whose end is the mere fact ; and let us do so with the recognition that these are at the basis of all scholarship. Let us take criticism in the sense of the art which judges, and explains, and describes literature.

The kind of criticism which of late has been making the greatest advances, which alone may claim to have made any real advance, is, in one form or another, historical. Its energy has given a distinctive character to modern criticism as a whole ; and its effects are to be found in the judgements of those who would not consciously follow any of its numerous methods. The critic has come almost habitually to consider a work in relation to the circumstances in which it was written, and it would now be difficult, even if it were advisable, for those whose duty it is to speak on literature to follow another plan. The idea of necessary change and of

dependence on the life of the time is not new; what is new is the prominence which it now receives. And the greater the emphasis which historical criticism lays on the conditions which determine the character of a work or a literature, the more clearly does it come into relation with the scientific movement of the last century. In Taine's *History of English Literature*, which we may take as marking the definite introduction of scientific interests, literary history endeavoured to become a species of natural history. It may not have succeeded. Yet those who see the shortcomings of this book, who regard it as the brilliant illustration of a delusive thesis, have often to recognize, and sometimes to acknowledge, its influence. We may consider it of more importance as the mark of a stage in modern criticism than as a history of our literature. It showed that when criticism calls for aid on science, it is likely to deal with what is strictly not literary. 'I undertake,' said Taine, 'to write the history of a literature, and to seek therein the psychology of a people.' And what interested him was not so much the literature as the causes which contributed to what he considered the psychology. Every historical critic nowadays is conscious of this or a similar danger. If he regards literature as the resultant of national or general forces, he may find sooner or later that he is wandering from his real theme.

The late M. Brunetière recognized this danger, and overcame it, but only to replace it by others. He is mentioned here, for, though he wrote little on English literature and had a limited knowledge of it, he has had some influence on English criticism—or perhaps we should say that he is the acknowledged representative of a method which is well known in this country. The doctrine of evolution had brought new life into almost every department of study. Why, he asked, was criticism to refuse its aid? It has been questioned if the method as Darwin understood it can be adapted by the critic, and questioned most strongly by those who know it best. They regret daily to see how the poor innocent word is racked and tortured.

To speak of evolution in literature, they tell us, is only to employ a metaphor. But, metaphor or not, M. Brunetière used what knowledge he had of the processes of science to develop the method on which his fame as a critic rests securely. He contended that the great influence in literature is the influence of books upon books. He regarded literature as a large body of life which divides itself into several species, and these he examined in their development. He asked us to consider Racine, not as Racine, but as the writer of a type of drama which had steadily perfected itself and was bound to be followed by a period of decadence. A work was a link in a chain, and on the value of the chain depended the value of the link. In America at the present day the best work is being done in the criticism which selects a single form—the ballad, tragedy, criticism itself, let us say—and describes its progress. There are many books of the same kind in this country, and have been for many years. But M. Brunetière, with his commanding personality, insisted more strongly than any one else on the necessity of this treatment; he employed his great knowledge and argumentative skill to show what it could achieve¹; and he must be credited with a large share in the establishment of its present vogue. If it gives the critic small chance of straying outside of literature proper, there are other dangers. The historian of a single literary form is apt to give it a false isolation, even if he do not neglect the aid which comes from a wider knowledge. Above all, he is likely to subordinate the author to the form. M. Brunetière recognized the part played by an author's personality in bringing a form to its point of perfection, but the problems of personality elude his method. This is more evident in the learned treatises which issue in increasing numbers from the Universities, especially of the Continent and America. While we examine the husk the kernel may slip from our grasp.

In the *History of English Poetry* which Mr. Courthope is now completing we find a method which is related to those of Taine and M. Brunetière. In words which recall

Taine's Mr. Courthope tells us that his object has been 'to treat poetry as an expression of the imagination, not simply of the individual poet, but of the English people'; and his habit is to prove that tendencies appear 'germinally' and pass to the 'efflorescence of decay'. He regards poetry in connexion with politics, society, and the national life. Though he has contrived to keep the personality of the poets before our view, he has looked for the unity of his subject, as he tells us, precisely where the political historian looks for it. To turn to his account of English poetry from Thomas Warton's is to find a new conception of the critic's duties, and the change reflects the progress in the methods of political history and of science.

Yet another form of historical criticism is that which calls itself 'comparative'. It has taken from science its title, and little more. Comparison is implied in all criticism; but this new school has chosen its name from the analogies which it attempts to establish with comparative anatomy, and folk-lore, and philology. Its favourite, if not its sole occupation is to trace a literary influence—the influence of Montaigne, let us say, on English literature, or the influence of English literature on Voltaire or Rousseau, or the influence of Byron in the Romantic Revival on the Continent. This school is nowhere more active than in France, and though still young has already done much notable work. But already there are signs that comparative criticism may fail to achieve what might be expected. In dealing with the interaction of literatures it has tended to confine itself to an examination of direct borrowings, to be content with showing the source of a plot, a theme, or a phrase. Though it calls itself comparative, it is strictly genealogical. It regards Europe as being, in Matthew Arnold's words, 'for intellectual and spiritual purposes one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result,' and it passes in chronological sequence from one country to another. By working on a basis of direct connexion it may neglect the similarities which are independent of

each other. Yet as long as it neglects these it is fortunate if it does more than scratch on the surface. The vital identities of French and English literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for instance, are bound to escape even the most elaborate statement of manifest and possible debts. In short, the evidence of interaction is not a necessary basis for comparative criticism.

Now all these theories, and all the forms which literary history has already taken, are at the very least an eloquent proof of the determined efforts of criticism to strengthen and perfect itself. They spring from the conviction that there is still something beyond its grasp. So the training of the historian of literature becomes more and more rigorous. He is told that he must not confine himself to his own country, but must take Europe as his province. He must be acquainted with the political and social factors in national life at different times. He is told again that he should not be ignorant of the teachings of science. We are reminded of a famous passage in *Rasselas* :

The business of a poet, said Imlac, is to examine not the individual but the species ; to remark general properties and large appearances. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind. But the knowledge of nature is only half the task of a poet ; he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life. His character requires that he trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions, and accidental influences, of climate or custom. He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country ; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state ; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same. His labour is not yet at an end : he must know many languages and many sciences ; and, that his style may be worthy of his thoughts, must, by incessant practice, familiarize to himself every delicacy of speech and grace of harmony.

Enough, said Rasselas, thou hast convinced me that no human being can ever be a poet.

But Imlac himself was a poet. He had not done all that he said others must do. And the historian of literature must make a choice. He may, as Leslie Stephen showed in his last lectures, regard literature as a particular function of the whole social organism ; or, like Mr. Courthope, he may treat it as an expression of the national imagination, or, like Taine, as the index to the psychology of a people ; or, like M. Brunetière, he may consider it by itself, as a thing of independent growth ; or he may continue that older kind of history which has much in common with the *catalogue raisonné*—and some of our most helpful histories have taken this form. Whatever his choice, the essential character of the historical method must always be to describe. ‘ Science,’ said Taine, in announcing his method, ‘ neither condemns nor pardons, it states and explains ’; and whether or not the modern historian is conscious of the influence of science, he finds that the passing of judgements, if it need not lie outside his province, is not necessarily included in it. He may find, too, that his interests tend to pass beyond the literature itself. In adopting a scheme which will give his work a unity, he may come to use literature chiefly for purposes of illustration. When a writer tells us that he views poetry in a social or a philosophical setting, he tells us in effect that his interests lie mainly in the setting. Further, the historian must always find difficulty in dealing with the problems of personality in literature.

It is the interest in the personality of an author which distinguishes another of the great branches of criticism. Biographical criticism, as we may call it, has been in vogue since the time of Dryden, and was pre-eminent in the eighteenth century ; and some recent monographs have reminded us of what it can achieve. The division which is here attempted is at best rough and ready, for the effects of the advance in history have been far-reaching. The lives of the poets now take account, as they could not do in the days of Johnson, of what is

called the 'spirit of the time', yet no new habit can conceal that their real object must always be to grapple with the poet's individuality. Historical methods in criticism may explain the Elizabethans, or the Elizabethan dramatists ; they cannot explain or exhibit the distinction of Shakespeare. It is the aim of personal criticism to show us the man behind the work. The poems, let us say, are the data from which we proceed to a knowledge of the source from which they came. We have sometimes difficulty in reconciling what we know of a man by common report with what he has written—as may be the case with Burns ; or even in reconciling what he has written at different times—as may be the case with Wordsworth. Personal criticism when it is successful will explain such discrepancies ; rather it will show that the discrepancies do not exist. The late Mr. Henley's biography of Burns may be cited as a triumph in this difficult art. There may be much in it to wound the pride of the modern Scot, but the whole coheres semblably : it draws for us the man who could have written the poems. This kind of criticism resolves itself into a study of character. Its basis lies in the sense of personal relationship between the reader and the man who reveals himself as the author. It is one thing to grasp the meaning of what is said : that alone is insufficient. There must be a feeling of ease or certainty in the author's company. Perhaps we may not like him ; but we come to know what to expect of him. When this reliance is disturbed, as it will be by something that seems unusually mean or noble, we adjust our views, and we cannot claim to know him till what he says tallies with our conceptions of what he might say. Some authors habitually invite this companionship. The novels of Charlotte Brontë are one long appeal to our friendship. But even with the greater writers who may seem to be indifferent to us, the measure of our esteem is our eagerness to establish this personal knowledge. The difficulties which so many experience with the poetry of Shelley, the unrest that may be felt in the presence of his greatest

work, sometimes find expression in the cry of despair, 'Shelley is not a man, Shelley is a spirit'. The criticism which would help the reader to attain to this relationship does not admit that the work can be dissociated from the author. It holds that everything he says, at least all that has its source in active thought and feeling, must reveal something. He need not speak of himself. The interest of memoirs and personal records often lies in what the writer did not intend to tell us. No one has had a greater dislike of exhibiting his private feelings than Scott had, yet the sure way to know him, surer than the study of his journal, is to read the *Waverley Novels*. We should expect the personal type of criticism to appeal least of all to those who in ordinary life have little interest in the study of character. Sainte-Beuve, who has consistently showed it at its best, came in time to regard it as an investigation of human nature, and he looked forward to the day when, in spite even of man's moral complexity, the great families of genius would be determined. But he did not allow this scientific purpose to obtrude itself, or in any way to modify his methods. He had a detailed knowledge of books which is the envy of every historian, and he was a master of literary theory, but his great aim was to paint men as he saw them. And this is evidently the kind of criticism which readily suggests itself to those in whom the artistic impulse is strong.

There remains the commonest kind of criticism—the criticism which deals with a work in itself, and may consider it without reference to its author or its date. The poem, let us say, is judged on its merits, as a separate definite fact. We may take Hazlitt as the representative of this kind, not with any claim that he shows it at its best, though it would be difficult to point to a more stimulating critic, but because he has spoken so often and so well on the methods of his art. 'We do not,' he says, 'on any rational scheme of criticism, inquire into the variety of a man's excellences, or the number of his

works, or his facility of production. *Venice Preserved* is sufficient for Otway's fame. I hate all those nonsensical stories about Lope de Vega and his writing a play in a morning before breakfast. He had time enough to do it after. If a man leaves behind him any work which is a model in its kind, we have no right to ask whether he could do anything else, or how he did it, or how long he was about it.' Hazlitt himself wrote at least one great biography, but he expressly denies that our knowledge of a man's life should be allowed in any way to influence our appreciation of what he had created. When he studies the plays of Shakespeare he shows complete indifference to the order in which they were written. He begins with *Cymbeline* and ends with the *Comedy of Errors*. He too holds that 'the play's the thing'; and nothing that he has said can be affected by the progress of Shakespearean investigation. This is the kind of criticism in which we habitually indulge in ordinary affairs. We like a thing or not—that is, our first impulse is to view it in relation to ourselves: to view it in relation to its maker is an acquired habit. So it is in literary criticism. The need of considering historical or personal conditions has been emphasized during the last two centuries, and most strongly in recent years. But the oldest kind of criticism, and the kind which can never be antiquated, is that which judges a work by reference to some standard of taste—perhaps a standard which seems to be instinctive, or perhaps one deliberately formed on the study of other works.

If for the moment we adopt the common but dangerous distinction of the form and the substance, we shall find that when criticism is still learning its work, and has still to gain confidence in itself, it takes the simple and obvious course and deals largely with the form. The Elizabethan critical tracts are written to tell the poet what he should do, and how he should do it. When criticism need no longer be didactic, when it has a large body of material on which to work, it deals more and more directly with the substance, till at last it frankly avows its effort to

reflect the colour, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work, to show what passion has been touched, and what tone and movement the author's mind imparts to his subject or receives from it—in a word, to interpret and reveal. This is pre-eminently the criticism of Hazlitt, as of Coleridge and Lamb. Of these three critics, two are among the great masters of the technique of English verse and prose, yet neither lays stress on formal elements in his judgements of others; and the third completely subordinates the execution to the conception. Hazlitt insisted that a knowledge of the methods of art is in no ways necessary for the understanding of a work of art, and may even be a hindrance. 'If,' he says, 'a picture be admired by none but painters, I think it is a strong presumption that the picture is bad'; and he carried this principle into his appreciation of literature. No man could be more convinced that the form is only a part of the substance. But it is a mistake to suppose—as Hazlitt was inclined, and as we are too—that the older critics ever believed that the form was separable and an end in itself. Even the most arid treatise on rhetoric assumes that the art of writing depends on the art of thinking. It was a reputed formalist who told us that 'the style is the man himself'.

What the critic has to guide him when he would consider a work in itself is the matter of a controversy which can never be ended. A poem has been defined as 'the succession of experiences—sounds, images, thoughts, emotions—through which we pass when we are reading as poetically as we can'—and so defined by one of our greatest teachers of poetry's permanent and independent value. It may mean something different to each of us; it is inconceivable that it can mean the same to every one; it is possible that to no one does it mean the same as to its author. We can never escape from ourselves, we are told. So why not recognize this with as good a grace as we can? And why persist in futile attempts to pass judgements, when all we can do is to express

our personal views? At this point the impressionists come into agreement with the historians who hold that they must neither condemn nor pardon; and they have arrived at common ground from very different starting-points. These contentions are an extreme expression of the great movement in the nineteenth century which emphasized the individuality of the artist. But they have been met long ago. They were answered by David Hume in his early essay on the standard of taste. And we shall not find anywhere a more convincing argument than Mr. Courthope's lectures on *Life in Poetry, Law in Taste*.

It may be urged that few critics—and certainly few of our living critics—could be placed exclusively in any one of the groups which have been indicated. But our purpose is not to classify the critical species. In literature it is always dangerous to lay stress on the separation of schools. We generally come to discover that the points of difference are not sufficient to warrant rigid division, and that even the most divergent groups have much in common. The sole object of this description has been to exhibit the variety of interests which each critic may have. At the present day these interests seem to lie in three main lines. We have only to think of the occupants of our University chairs. And here let me remark that it is the Universities now which speak with most authority in matters of taste. The history of literary criticism in France during the nineteenth century may be regarded as a long struggle for pre-eminence between the University and the press. The Romantic movement voices itself in the *Globe*. Then the Sorbonne speaks in the persons of Villemain, and Guizot, and Cousin. Then Sainte-Beuve contributes his *Causées* to the *Constitutionnel*, and the *Moniteur*, and the *Temps*. And latterly the honours have been divided, for if we take M. Brunetière, as we must, as the outstanding figure in recent years, we find that though he will always be associated with the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, he yet chose to give his chief pronouncement

on his method of criticism, and his chief application of it, in the form of University lectures. It has not been so in England. It is a feature peculiar to our own time that our leading critics dispense the sweet food of academic institution. But they dispense it in different ways. Let us think of Mr. Courthope, Mr. Bradley, Mr. Raleigh, Mr. Saintsbury, Mr. Ker, and others. Here is variety of interest and method. But there are three definite points, on one of which, or all of which, criticism must base itself. There is the date, and the author, and the work. We may describe the national or literary conditions amid which a work appeared, or consider it as a stage in a trend of thought ; or we may try to reveal an author's personality ; or we may show our interest in the ideas and execution of a work and the problems of taste which these suggest. We may do one of these, or all these. And these three points—the date, the author, and the work—are the only justification of the division which is here attempted.

It is useless to ask which method in criticism is the best. No one need ever be in doubt as to which he should adopt. The best method must always be that which enables the writer to express himself most clearly and fully. If we perfect a system of our own, we shall be fortunate if in time we do not become its slave. We run the risk of being drawn into our own machinery : we shall find ourselves, or others will find us, producing all our judgements to pattern. It would not be difficult to point to one or two critics whose later work lacks the attraction of their earlier essays, not merely because we can forecast what they will say, but because their acquired ease in their method has taken the edge off their appreciation. A great part of Dryden's charm as a critic lies in the recognition that we can seldom be sure of what he will say next. He is continually reviewing his opinions. He contradicts himself, but by so doing he renews himself, and the best and freshest of all his essays was his last. We like those critics who in their own work show us life in taste.

There are some critics whom, in Johnson's words, we

read with frequent astonishment, and others with perpetual delight. Among these are Johnson himself, and Dryden, and Hazlitt, and Coleridge, and Lamb. And if we try to discover the reason, we shall probably find that it lies in this, that in showing us the play of their strong and subtle intellect they have shown us themselves. How far criticism may be strictly impersonal, may be questioned. There are some critics who in their loyalty, their discipleship let us say, try to lose themselves in their author. They would make their criticism a scrupulous interpretation. Yet we know that the very qualities which fit them best to enter into an author's meaning—their sympathy, their delicacy of perception—are those which are most likely to make them reveal themselves. Other critics frankly admit that they do not wish to be hidden. No matter what their intention may be, we shall find that the critics whom we respect most, whom we read with greatest zest, have all of them made us feel strongly their own personality. Call criticism a parasite if we will. It has been called many bad names. The men who have failed turn critics, said Coleridge and Shelley in almost identical words, and they were only repeating what Pope and Swift had said more forcibly. But Coleridge turned critic without having failed, and he found that he could be as original in criticism as in a poem. It may be to an author's purpose to express himself in the form of the drama or the novel: the great critics have known how to reveal their outlook on life in discussing the characters of Shakespeare's plays, or commenting on the 'republicanism' of Milton and the 'foppery' of Gray. We dare not call the critic who describes the great movements of literature a parasite, and refuse the title to the political historian; and he who exhibits the personality of an author deserves it no more than the portrait-painter. And when Coleridge writes on the art of Shakespeare, is he concerned merely with Shakespeare and his art? He is interested in Shakespeare only as the mirror of nature, for nature is his ultimate theme.

Should we lament, as Goldsmith did, that it seems the spirit of the times for men to exhaust their natural sagacity in exploring the intricacies of another man's thoughts and thus never to have leisure to think for themselves, we should forget that a man cannot explore another's thoughts without thinking for himself. If it be true that poetry is a criticism of life, it is also true that criticism is ultimately a criticism of life.

And no criticism of great work can ever be final. We often hear it asked if we have not yet heard the last word on Shakespeare. Say the last word on Shakespeare and there would be an end to what he lavishes in inexhaustible profusion. Each time that we approach the great artists with an alert mind, we discover a new wealth of meaning, and the greatest are the most certain to elude us when we think to take their measure. All living art must baffle in some way or other the attempts to win its secrets, for the simple reason that it is living. And each age approaches these secrets in its own manner.

We run the risk, especially in this age of textbooks, of associating a critic too closely with the methods of the school to which we think he belongs. The temptation to paint in black and white is hard to resist. When we are dealing with a considerable period of time we find it a convenient and perhaps the easiest course to arrive by some process at a general idea of the characteristics of the age, and then to regard the writers as the representatives of these. But in no other course does historical sympathy, on which we like to pride ourselves, have a harder fight with our prejudices.

The eighteenth century has suffered much from this habit. Even now we often find Samuel Johnson treated as the great expounder of the so-called eighteenth-century code—for the same textbooks which teach us to beware of Macaulay betray his influence. Macaulay said that 'Johnson decided literary questions like a lawyer, not like a legislator. He never examined founda-

tions where a point was already ruled. His whole code of criticism rested on pure assumption, for which he sometimes quoted a precedent or an authority, but rarely troubled himself to give a reason drawn from the nature of things'; and in a modified form these large assertions are still with us. No one who goes to the *Lives of the Poets* or the edition of Shakespeare with an open mind will ever discover what this code is. Johnson had critical principles; every critic, even the impressionist, must sooner or later arrive at principles. But Johnson's principles were not made for him; they were based on his own perceptions. What he does from his first page to his last is to apply his own experience of life and his own experience of letters—and his experience of life rather than of letters. It is true in a sense that he decided literary questions like a lawyer. He is aloof and judicial in his manner; he allows no play of sentiment. He brings every one to the bar, even his poetic masters Dryden and Pope, and he passes judgement. The statement may be accepted only in a sense that Macaulay did not intend. For what is Johnson's idea of what criticism should do? We have his own statement: it is preserved for us by Boswell. Mrs. Montagu's *Essay on Shakespeare* was under discussion. Reynolds said that he thought it did her honour, and Johnson assented that it did *her* honour, but added that there was not one sentence of true criticism in it. Whereupon Garrick suggested that it showed how much Voltaire had mistaken Shakespeare, which nobody else had done. 'Sir,' replied Johnson, 'nobody else has thought it worth while. And what merit is there in that? No, sir, there is no real criticism in it: none showing the beauty of thought as formed on the workings of the human heart.' This is a description which the most ardent romantic would accept, and which he might be surprised to find in Johnson. Yet Johnson's own Shakespeare and his *Lives* everywhere show the beauty of thought as formed on the workings of the human heart—and therein lies their abiding value.

Johnson once thought of writing a 'History of Criticism, as it relates to judging of authors, from Aristotle to the present age. An account of the rise and improvements of that art; of the different opinions of authors, ancient and modern'. It heads the list of forty-nine works—histories, poems, translations, treatises, dictionaries, editions—which even his energy was unable to accomplish. It is common to think that Johnson was lazy. He was continually lamenting his indolence, and we have taken him at his word. But his writings fill eleven or twelve large octavo volumes; and he brought out without assistance one of the great editions of Shakespeare, and he compiled with little assistance one of the greatest of dictionaries. This is not the tale of sloth. He would have had no misgivings had he possessed only the common share of energy, had he not been endowed with a phenomenal power of rapid work. Still we wish that he had written his 'History of Criticism'; of his forty-nine unwritten works, we regret it most. Much that it would have contained may be preserved for us in his essays and prefaces. He could not have written better than he did in his Preface to Shakespeare; and he could not have indicated his standpoint more clearly than in his *Rasselas*, and his Notes to Shakespeare, and the remarks which Boswell has recorded. But we should have seen him as the historian, tracing the rise and improvement in the art of criticism from Aristotle to his own time. And he who was proud to be a man of the world and to take its colour as it moves along, and who saw the limits of those whose notions are taken from the old world, would have had another great opportunity of proving his knowledge of human character and life. Of one thing we may be sure—he would have shown that real criticism deals with the beauty of thought as formed on the workings of the human heart.

Nor is the code to be found in any of the great critics of the eighteenth century. What, it may be asked, of Pope's *Essay on Criticism*? This poem is the brilliant

work of a youth who has not yet attained to the full mastery of his thought. He has great command of expression and quickness of judgement. No other poem by a writer of his years has given so many phrases to the English language. But it is weak in structure. The development of its main ideas is not clear—is in fact confused. It embodies many things that are to be found in French criticism, and these, if ne'er so well expressed, are not always assimilated. We cannot apply to the *Essay* its own words,

No single parts unequally surprise,
All comes united to the admiring eyes ; . . .
The whole at once is bold and regular.

On emerging from this labyrinth of critical precocity, the reader may conclude, from the frequent mention of rules, that here at least has been the exposition of a code : yet such a view cannot be reconciled with recurring statements in the poem itself. Pope holds that every successful work will be found to conform to certain general rules ; but he satirizes those who, beginning at the other end, think that by conforming to rules they must be successful :

Some drily plain, without invention's aid,
Write dull receipts how poems may be made.

The critic who lays stress on the rules will fail to appreciate great literature :

In every work regard the writer's end. . . .
Neglect the rules each verbal critic lays,
For not to know some trifles is a praise.
Most critics, fond of some subservient art,
Still make the whole depend upon a part :
They talk of principles, but notions prize,
And all to one lov'd folly sacrifice.

The rules are the literary principles that may be drawn from a study of the masters. But they may be added to indefinitely :

Some beauties yet no precepts can declare,
For there's a happiness as well as care.
Music resembles poetry : in each
Are nameless graces which no methods teach,
And which a master-hand alone can reach.
If where the rules not far enough extend
(Since rules were made but to promote their end)
Some lucky licence answer to the full
Th' intent propos'd, that licence is a rule.

In other words, if you succeed in a new way, you create a new rule. If you put the telescope to your blind eye, you will be justified if you win the battle, and only if you win it. For ordinary people it is the safest course to learn from their betters. But

Great wits sometimes may gloriously offend,
And rise to faults true critics dare not mend ;
—From vulgar bounds with brave disorder part,
And snatch a grace beyond the reach of art.

Or we may put it in the words of David Hume : ‘ Did our pleasure really arise from those parts of a poem which we denominate faults, this would be no objection to criticism in general: it would only be an objection to those particular rules of criticism which would establish such circumstances to be faults, and would represent them as universally blameable. If they are found to please, they cannot be faults, let the pleasure which they produce be ever so unexpected and unaccountable.’ Now we have the option of two courses. We may say, as has been said, that ‘ the poet-critic practically confesses the otiosity of the whole system by admitting that a lucky licence is a rule, and that it is possible “to snatch a grace beyond the reach of art ” ’. Or we may hold that there was no system—and it is not the least merit of this view that it does not assume the *Essay on Criticism* to be a tissue of inconsistencies and contradictions. The truth is that it is the word ‘ rule ’ which frightens us ; and it is an unhappy word. It was bound to be unwelcome to those who enjoyed the liberties of the nineteenth century. But the rules are nothing more than the recognized features

of good writing. We could draw a body of rules from Wordsworth and Keats as well as from Homer and Virgil. Is not the so-called eighteenth-century code but another case of the emperor's new clothes—something which many talk about, but which nobody has ever seen?

Code or no code, Pope's taste in his judgements of others will seldom be called in question. He had a knowledge of English literature which was unrivalled in his day. He was the first to plan a history of English Poetry. Even in his edition of Shakespeare he showed the way to others. In him, as in Dryden, we find anticipations of many of the critical developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We do not have the same sense of growth and movement in their French contemporary Boileau. He is the spokesman of a literature which believes itself to be attaining to the summits, and the consciousness of this has reacted on his opinions and his reputation. But there has never been a greater critic of contemporary work than Boileau. It was he who, amid strong and varied opposition, assured Louis XIV that Molière was the greatest genius of the age—Molière who smiled at the talk about rules, and said that the same good sense which had made them could still make them any day without the help of Aristotle and Horace. He told Molière himself, when the *Misanthrope* met with a disappointing reception, that it was decidedly his greatest work. And he maintained to Racine, when the *Athalie* had failed, that the public would come to recognize it as a masterpiece. To judge contemporary literature is one of the great critical tests. It is a test from which many shrink. They prefer to wait till they can see things in perspective. But a work does not develop into a masterpiece by the mere process of time. It is no small merit to have anticipated the verdicts of posterity; and this is not the only reason why we should hold in honour the name of one Boileau.

He formed his taste on the classics, and he held that the one reason why the classics should be studied is that they have stood the test of time. 'The antiquity of a writer,' he says in a memorable passage, 'is not a certain

title of merit, but the constant admiration which his works have enjoyed is an infallible proof that they should be admired.' Persistent appreciation, in different countries as at different times, shows that they must answer to something deep and essential in human nature. And by the study of the classics in the light of his own experience he arrives at a taste which enables him in turn to judge the classics themselves. Let it be remarked incidentally that there can be no better approach to the criticism of English literature than a knowledge of the classics : but the same argument will also tell us that a taste which has been nurtured in the study of English will not speak lightly on the literature of Greece and Rome. The critics of what we now call the classical school did not maintain that the study of the ancients was indispensable, though they held that it was the surest course. They knew that the supreme authority is vested in the common sense of mankind. 'I can attribute my success,' says Boileau, in what he intended as the final edition of his works, 'only to the care I have taken always to conform to the opinion of the public. A work gains nothing by being praised by a small number of connoisseurs ; if it has not a certain charm and spirit likely to whet the general taste, it will never pass for a good work, and in the end the connoisseurs themselves will have to allow that they were wrong in giving it their approbation.' The people may be deceived for a time, and they may need the critic to open their eyes. But unless the people come to think with the critic his opinion is wrong. We saw that Johnson's idea of real criticism might serve to range him with the romantics : here we find Boileau in agreement with Hazlitt . There is in truth a very great danger in emphasizing the distinction of schools. The old opposition of the classic and romantic served its purpose in the nineteenth century. In the light of further knowledge we now know the difficulties in the application of either term. But the same difficulties await us when we attempt any division of the poets or critics. Differences are obvious : they are often obvious because they lie on the surface.

When we are asked what is the common function of all criticism, we can only make the simple reply that it is to aid appreciation. Some have held that it is the duty of the critic to keep the poets in order and police the republic of letters. Others tell us that he must think for the crowd, others that he must interpret, others again that he must judge and class. A judgement is of value only as a means to appreciation ; and it need not presume to close the case. The case can never be closed. The verdicts are always subject to revision. We may be unjust to ourselves if we accept without demur the opinions of an earlier generation. We do not expect a final verdict on life, though each age strives to give it, and may give one that is acceptable to itself. No more need we expect final verdicts on the art which has its whole existence in life. But if we dare not accept without consideration the judgements in which other times have framed their literary faith, we dare not ignore or despise them. When the deliberate opinions of different ages are considered dispassionately, their opposition is found as a rule to be less pronounced than was supposed. We have now learned to respect the taste of other nations. It is one of the lessons of the study of criticism that the same respect is to be shown to the taste of other times.

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